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## Introduction: Thinking with Deviance

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Nothing in the whole history of our Empire in the East is likely to make a greater impression on our Indian fellow subjects than the splendid demonstration that is now in progress at Delhi.... The Delhi Durbar is a splendid proof that British rule in India has not only been successful, but has become popular... The VICEROY, speaking in the name of the SOVEREIGN, impresses the Oriental imagination, but even this is not the most important element in the effect of the Durbar at Delhi. The Princes and the population of India have learned to understand the solid power and the steady policy of the British Empire... In Delhi, at all events, the East, which always recognises the reality of power, can heartily welcome an Empire which, after centuries of strife and terrorism, has brought pacification to a dominion almost as large as Europe.

‘Nothing in the whole history of our Empire’,  
*The Times of London*, 30 December 1902.

We do not wish to advocate an unholy haughtiness; but an Indian household can no more be governed peacefully, without dignity and prestige, than an Indian Empire.

*The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*,  
Flora Annie Webster Steel (1904).

### Performing and Subverting Power

Colonialism was invested in the performance of power – from the pomp and ceremony of the imperial durbars to the everyday interactions of

performed superiorities. The basic legitimating idea behind empire was the notion that the colonisers were superior to the colonised, whether that be in the form of unique access to the means of production, supposedly democratic systems of governance or those racial and cultural registers of difference that justified rule and interlaced it with high-minded ideals of imperial benevolence. These were not *de facto* truths, but synthetic, constructed ideologies. Imperialism was invested in its own performance of pre-eminence and colonial powers believed themselves uniquely capable of harnessing their ascendancy for the benefit of themselves and others.

The key to understanding this ideology of superiority lies in its recognition not as mere ignorance or self-delusion but as a studied and manufactured set of common senses that legitimised imperial rule and became the implicit assumptions underpinning colonial interactions. Recognising this performative aspect need not blind us to the very real violence and coercion of colonial systems however. From wars of pacification and conquest via rebellions and their suppression, to the everyday cruelties, humiliations and exactions of colonial regimes throughout the world, colonialism was invested in the strategic deployment of force. Such deployment was itself demonstrative. The exercise no less than the symbolism of power was performatively conveyed.

There are few better examples of the performative quality of colonial violence than the events surrounding the Amritsar massacre in 1919. On 11 April, at a time of intense anti-British feeling in Amritsar and elsewhere across India, an English missionary, Marcella Sherwood, was pulled from her bicycle by a crowd of Indians and assaulted. Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer, in charge of British troops, was outraged. Having issued a command ordering all Indians passing the site of the assault to crawl the length of the street on their bellies, Dyer explained, 'some Indians crawl face downwards in front of their gods. I wanted them to know that a British woman is as sacred as a Hindu god and, therefore, they have to crawl in front of her too.'<sup>1</sup> In his attempt to restore order, Dyer knew the value of racial symbol. Sherwood, the white lady missionary, embodied civilisation: if Indians would not recognise her sanctity, then they would be forced to perform their own self-abasement. Whenever colonial hierarchies were subverted, the forces of law and order were called upon to restore at least the appearance of racial deference and white prestige.

This book seeks to move beyond and behind these performances to the 'lived realities' of colonial life by looking at those individuals who subverted, deviated from or were marginalised by European, specifically